

# to Lola Olufemi

A letter about revolutionary love, the moments that connect,  
letting go of beginninings and endings and your book  
*Experiments in Imagining Otherwise.*

**From the occupied territory of so-called Australia.  
Stolen land, never ceded.**

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## -- Fragment one: writing --

I've never before written a letter to an author that I did not already know. I'm not telling you this because I want this letter to seem particularly special. It's more to allow me to introduce a small amount of context about where I'm at as I started to read *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise*.

I'm in Berlin right now and the idea that I came to Europe for a long, hot summer is already feeling distant as the days become shorter and cocooned in the grey, chill of autumn. I return to my home in Naarm (otherwise known by it's colonised name of Melbourne, in so-called Australia) in less than two weeks. The mood is definitely one of contemplation and deep thought about the next stage of life, how I hold onto a revolutionary imagination filled with rebellious desires as I get older and how I incorporate the experiences I've had and lessons I've learned while I've been here.

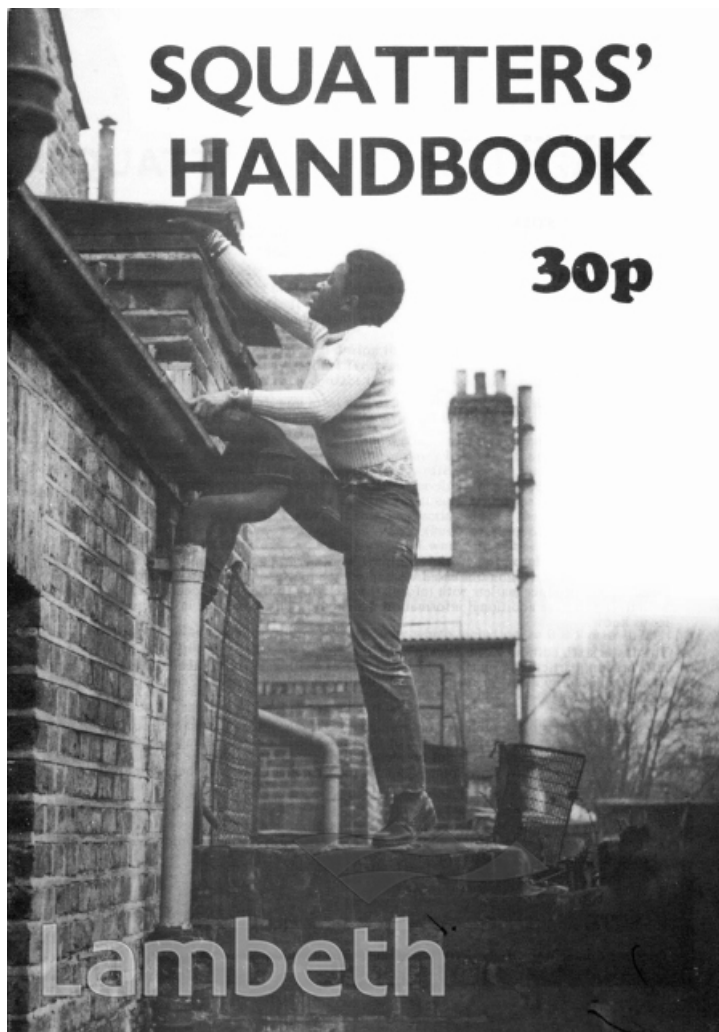
I write to try to make sense of such considerations. There's been a small amount of writing I've been doing on this trip – some postcards and letters to loved ones, a couple of 'travel story' type pieces and one long(ish) piece of feedback to a friend about a draft of an excellent article that they wrote. But I have no more postcards to send now.

## -- Fragment two: serendipity --

There is a story that seems worth telling about how finding your book, even before I had read a page, gave me a sharp, visceral sense – a little eruption, a shiver down my spine – of how some things just seem to connect.

I hadn't really planned to go to London or the UK on this trip, and I ended up there for less than a week to see a friend, staying in south London, near Brixton. I came across *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* at the London Anarchist Bookfair. Only its spine was displayed as it sat alongside numerous other books at one stall, but I was particularly drawn to the title. Picking it up, I appreciated the minimalism of the front cover, the circle drawn with an imperfect, yellow line and also the size – I wasn't in the market for an epic tome while travelling.

I flicked open to a random page, eighteen. It had a sub-heading 'Narrative consistency' and just below that an image – probably a photograph originally



– that had been cleared of all shading and detail, leaving only the outlines of the main actors. While that missing detail would undoubtedly add more to the story, the form it is rendered in here means that what is being depicted jumps out at the reader and is comprehended immediately: a person talking back *at* two police officers, while two other people look on. I read the note underneath the image and the name of that person: Olive Morris. And I had my moment of joyful, serendipity.

I first encountered Olive Morris twelve years ago in 2010. It was my first time heading to Europe and for the first few weeks there I was staying in a squat

in south London, near Brixton. It was early winter, there'd already been snow and in the daytime the skies were milky and soft, without any of the dazzle I was used to. A part of me wants the story to be that I simply stumbled upon an exhibition as I wandered the streets near Vauxhall, but I think it's more realistic that I had been told about this event and went looking for it.

The exhibition celebrated Olive Morris and through a collection of different media such as pamphlets, posters, leaflets, photos, and newspapers, gave an account of the fullness of her life and the inspiring feminist, anti-racist and housing struggles that she participated in during the late 60's and 70's. I specifically remember the Squatter's Handbook that you refer to and the incredible picture of her on the front cover, climbing towards a second story rooftop. As a brown person of south Asian descent, I'd also been excited to find references to radical Asians organising alongside and in solidarity with black activists in anti-racist and anti-fascist coalitions.

Although I'd never forgotten that exhibition – it is a defining experience of my first time in London – I'd sadly forgotten Olive Morris' name in the intervening years. And then it was there, in front of me again, on the page of your book. While 2010 now exists amongst the nostalgic haze of my first trip to Europe, the figure of Olive Morris, as retold through that exhibition and in this book, has become a shockingly significant presence in my life. Especially for someone I could never meet.

You and I both know that Olive died too young. Only 27, she had passed before either of us were born. But in the fragment that you write as short narrative here, she becomes a relatable figure, strong and thoughtful, deeply in love with the people she struggles alongside and anxious about the state's response to those struggles.

At a different point in this book, you will write that “there is a cyclical historical process that connects us and makes us responsible for one another”. This sense of connection, and responsibility, to those that have fought and loved before resonates strongly. Since I was a teenager, I have drawn from revolutionary history – all the rebellions, uprisings, riots and anti-colonial resistance – and claimed it as part of my own. As the intersections of colonisation, capital and migration left me far removed from any connection to a familial ‘homeland’, I found other moments that inspired and helped me make sense of the what-is-now. I am older now and more cautious in not simplistically incorporating other people's resistance into my own, but I do appreciate reminders that there is value in finding connection through such histories, that resistance and liberation cannot be one-size-fits-all, but is nonetheless bound up in shared struggle. Olive Morris is a reminder of that for me.

## -- Fragment three: beginning / ending --

I'm writing you this letter even though I am only just halfway through this book. I suppose this might be a strange thing to do, but it also seems like the necessary thing – that the most appropriate way to write about your book involved allowing myself to become untethered from the linearity of 'beginning' and 'end'. Writing in a way that reflects one of the most defining characteristics of what you ask the reader to understand: that "the future is not in front of us, it is everywhere simultaneously: multidirectional, variant, spontaneous".

I am drawn into your commitment to usurping the idea of time as a straight line, as you ask what happens if we "think of history as living commotion, a sprawling mess of the not-quite-said or did-it-actually-happen, or what-year-was-the-massacre, or what-ushered-in-the-epoch"? It is a relation to revolutionary time that I want to hold, that I think provides most possibility – it might be uncomfortable and messy, but in that unknown there is an opening. You refer to this as 'the otherwise' – "a firm embrace of the unknowable" – and amidst much hand-wringing about effective 'revolutionary' strategy, party programs, movement building, planning for 'change', making demands, etc, I find myself scanning the scant remaining space on the horizon for that unknowable, 'otherwise', where liberation can't be a-fixed to one prevailing trajectory.

I wonder if you have ever come across the essay *Rethinking the Apocalypse: An Indigenous Anti-Futurist Manifesto*? It is an astonishing piece of writing that is not entirely graspable for me – and being someone who is not Indigenous, maybe it is not meant to be entirely graspable – but that stirs my heart as it posits an "Indigenous anti-future" against the "apocalyptic that colonises our imagination and destroys our past and future simultaneously... the futurism of the coloniser". I want to reset all revolutionary compositions and imaginings that temporally align it with linear progressivism, a crawl on our knees from the past to a supposed glorious future. Adherence to this linearity seems unavoidably connected to suggestions of colonial 'betterment' of the 'savage' even when uttered by radicals. And so I am always moved by writing that refuses to become glued to such timelines and demands that we think outside of their limited scope for change.

## — Fragment four: hope —

There seems to be a relation, I assume we all enter into, where encountering something beautiful – and taking into account how that adjective is subjective instead of universal – can hint at some different kind of possibility that stirs a sense of hope. I love welcoming that feeling into my life, but I am careful to not become hooked, to not take the pleasure of now as an indication of what *must be*. Hope is weaponised, configured as a political necessity, rendered impotent of an immediate presence by too often being a deferral to a future promise.

But you don't do any of that. Your writing accounts for hope and the future but refuses that it be a core tenet, an obligation and you are willing to reject it when it is "an empty gesture of optimism".

For all the deep insight and meaning that has connected for me throughout this book, it is your words on eleven that I hold most dearly, that I want to be a treatise for my life. Here, you are unwilling to allow 'hope' to float in its own abstracted purity, but instead tie it to a "determination to own a condition of disaster". You take this further, proposing "a commitment to extending the disastrous moment if it means the possibility of more living, or refusing ongoing brutalisation of the self and others", and so cleaving hope away from the empty gesture.

This is also what stands out to me about the short narrative called 'Red' that starts on forty-four. You dream up a moment of ongoing social upheaval, where the details of what cataclysm has befallen are less important than the new relations being formed to the earth, to each other through communities engaged in re-building and self-defence and to the self through the eyes of the main character, Aude. You refer to 'disaster communism' and you do not avoid the fear, the ugliness and the anxieties that exist alongside the forms of love and living that are coming into view as these new relations are being formed. This is no utopian vision of future-perfect.

I also appreciate the possibility that "we are going to lose" as you declare on seventy-six. You're right: we have to learn to deal with defeat. Previously I might have left it at that as if I'd laid down some crucial piece of wisdom, but you propose an otherside to defeat that isn't a simplistic binary of 'victory'. Instead, you make a claim for re-enchantment rather than allowing an acceptance of defeat to entirely wither ourselves. And you capture the magic of re-enchantment as "a cigarette from a window when the sky is at its clearest, a table of friends (and dare I say it, *comrades*) screeching, a deep



exhale after a long period of stagnation, a good meal, a long hug, the moment that person finally lets you see them for the first time”.

Adherence to hope within our political imaginations is often posited in contrast to a brutalist, ugly utilitarianism. This understanding seems upside-down to me because too often, it is precisely these futures filled with hope that are envisioned as being at the end of a long, arduous road that must be steadfastly followed. Instead, can we not enjoy the moments of resistance, liberation (even if exceedingly short), re-enchantment and love that make up our struggles right now for the fullness they bring into our lives?

## == Fragment Five: Fragments ==

On thirteen you say “these days I only write in fragments” and follow with an explanation that jolts with its sharpness, that “maybe it is because I can’t know anything absent what I have been told the earth means by capital”. ‘Fragments’ is precisely how I have been describing my writing process for a few years. Less able to envision things from a starting thought through to an end point, the constant commotion of the everyday having changed my cognitive capacity. Yet, beyond a ‘writing process’ this is also a reflection of the closest to a ‘revolutionary’ process that I can conjure. Fragments of resistance that at times coalesce into larger uprisings that... well, maybe one day.

I can only proceed with an amount of faith that the threads connecting the different parts will become apparent, forming connections that bring the constituent pieces together. What if those connections never do occur? Well, maybe we can also learn to appreciate the space those constituent parts chisel out and occupy, removed from the need for some other overarching logic. And yes, I’m unclear if I am talking about writing or revolution any more.

I am simultaneously reading another book that is composed of fragments, *Letters Against the Firmament* – a compilation of short poems, long poems, letters, rants and more. Have you encountered Sean Bonney previously? I’d love to introduce him to you, although, he also, sadly, passed too young. Like you, his writing is situated in London and deeply rooted in rebellious desires and resistance. On the one hand, it couldn’t be more different. He projects as a cantankerous, middle-aged, white man, and that might be a reason to be hesitant to engage – knowing that the grievances of that ‘type’ are already given all the space to be aired and how they tend towards stubborn, conservatism.



But his writing is *beautiful* despite (because of?) being full of obscenity and bitterness as he expresses rage at the everyday humiliations that capitalist, class society inflicts on all of us through labour, police, electoral politics and the clock. He seethes against the constant blockages of liberalism, takes the side of the looters and rioters with no clause and doesn't simply become stuck in this present, he finds paths to project the bitterness, rage and resistance into images of a different future. He writes of poetics as "a map, a counter-map, actually, a chart of the spatio-temporal rhythm of the riot-form, its prosody and signal-frequency. A map to show the paths not taken".

Wait. Didn't you write something about maps too? On thirty-two you declare that your "aim is to produce a map that is nothing like a map at all but rather a record of traces that make connections between the past(present/future)----the present(future/past)----and the future(past/present). I want to demonstrate how these temporal regimes encroach on one another, so to tell the story of the past means telling the story of the present, which is already where the future resides".

I think that maybe I do not need to introduce you to Sean Bonney. After all, the synchronicity of thought and theme reverberates despite the very different – both, incredibly evocative – styles, and positions those styles emanate from. Following your declaration about maps, you quote Edouard Glissant, and his words precisely articulate the notion I am trying to lean into here: "Trace thought enables us to move away from the strangulations of the system. It thus refutes the extremes of possession... It is the violent wandering of the shared thought".

## -- Fragment six: writing --

I love the thought behind the blank page that you leave for collaboration on sixteen. My feeling is that even if we accept that there is a skill and practice to writing, that the most that any of us who write 'politically' are really doing is synthesising and elaborating on ideas that have been produced by people in struggle. I think it's important to remember that and ensure that we attempt to create spaces where collaboration is possible.

I also want to make sure that I remember and hold on to the disdain with which you tell us to "not listen to the rich writer's opinions of the goings-on... They are not with you... they will cling to the desk when the world bursts". I have seen this in practice, one-time radicals drawn away from moments of collective love and resistance by the importance of their 'work' until they are so safely ensconced in a world of their own that their writing becomes rootless and unreachable.

What I might ask you now, is not to tell me about the endings: for the book or for any of *this*. It would be an unfair question and, in any case, not one that that seems to be the purpose of your writing. So instead, maybe I could ask you to tell me something of how and why we should write? Why does it matter (if it matters at all) apart from feeding an undefined, but nonetheless ravenous need for content, for arguments and debate, for righteous positions against? Instead, how can we do this as part of a collective, radical practice – and against the individualising pull of 'writing'? So that it might contribute and help propel further that 'violent wandering of shared thought'.



